

Family Stigma: An Analysis of R.K. Narayan's 'The Dark Room'

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of the concept of domestic harmony in a middle-class South Indian family. *The Dark Room* by famous Indian English writer R.K. Narayan throws light on social inequality in its way, set in Malgudi, the fictional South Indian town. The entire novel is in the perspective of Savitri and 'dark room' is the world of Savitri and not of her husband Ramani's. Once the bond between Ramani and Savitri is strained, not only the husband and wife but even their children suffer. At one point, Savitri leaves her family to live on her own but pathetically fails and returns to home. This action of returning is a significant leap in women's emancipation. However, her attempts to find self-expression are justifiable. The novel narrates a woman's position in a male dominated society and how far a middle-class woman can resist and find her individual space in family and society. From the ancient period onwards, the general notion is that women had no freedom to make their own decisions and always had to be submissive. Savitri, the novel's protagonist, is a typical example of this ideology and embodies the qualities of a dutiful and faithful wife. As the novel progresses, her individuality also grows and shows some remarkable changes. Feminism advocates women's rights based on the equality of sexes, and Savitri can be considered a forerunner of the feminist movement.

Keywords: Patriarchy, marriage, womanhood, self-expression, individuality, liberation.

The field of Indian English literature demonstrates the masters of Indian writing in English. Indian English literature has attained an independent status in world literature due to profusely creative works produced by Indian writers in English. Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Sarojini Naidu, Salman Rushdie, and Arundathi Roy are prominent figures of Indian English literature. R.K.Narayan was born in Madras in 1906. Most of his works are set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi. *Swami and Friends*, *The Dark Room*, *The Guide*, *The Tiger of Malgudi*, and *The Vendor of Sweets* are some of his famous novels. *The Dark Room*, which was published in 1938, can be considered one of the earliest Indian English novels that deals with the theme of gender inequality and

women's rights. As the famous feminist critic Adichie has rightly pointed out, we teach females that in relationships, compromise is what a woman is likely to do. The novel reveals the pressure of married life in traditional Indian society. In orthodox families, a man holds a superior position as the head of the family, and the woman is confined to managing household duties.

The married life of Ramani and Savitri paints a grim picture of the disturbed household. Ramani, an official in Engladia Insurance Company, gets attracted to the newly appointed elegant, relatively fiercely independent Shanta Bhai. This relationship affects the domestic harmony. Shantabhai flirts with Ramani, and her beauty transfixes him. Savitri is told about this affair by a neighbor named Gangu. Being a wife, she feels heartbroken for his infidelity but decides to suffer the torment in silence. Instead of rebuking Ramani, she wallows in self-pity; she questions her beauty and inability to give more children to him. Later, Savitri tries to be strong and decides to win back her husband from the clutches of Shanta Bhai. She is naive in thinking that she can get back to the passionate first week of their marriage. Unfortunately, all her attempts are crippled, and she fails. All her deep-seated emotions come out when he tries to touch her, and she is charged with anger and pain; she leaves her husband's home with the intention of ending her life. She jumps into the river and gets rescued by Mari, the blacksmith. Later, she starts working in a temple for her livelihood. As days pass, she becomes sadder and succumbs to the motherly feeling and returns to the darkroom in her husband's home.

Savitri, as the name suggests, is a dutiful and loyal housewife. In a patriarchal society, her submissive nature makes her the victim of her husband's whims, fancies, insults, and criticisms. Narayan presents Savitri and Shanta Bhai as stereotypical characters who perform two opposite diametrically functions; Savitri is a traditional housewife while Shanta Bhai is a modern woman who is in search of emancipation. Both are vulnerable when it comes to their positions in the patriarchal society. The entire novel is narrated in the perspective of Savitri and 'the dark room' is the world of Savitri and not of Ramani. "I am a human being. You men will never grant that. For you we are playthings when you feel like hugging and slaves at other times" (85). Simone de Beauvoir, a French writer and philosopher, expresses her view that one is not born a woman, but becomes. Savitri decides to leave the status of being a slave to her husband and break the barriers of patriarchy. Unfortunately, she becomes helpless in her new destination also and undergoes mental torture and insecurity under the dominance of the priest, her new male boss.

Narayan presents Savitri as a woman who makes a conscious effort to free herself from illusion and tries to establish womanly dignity. She attempts to find self-expression rather than jumping to an instant success. When the novel begins, the younger child is ill, and Savitri does not have the right to decide whether the child has to go to school or not. Ramani says, don't interfere in such affairs and leave the training of a grown-up boy to him as it is not a woman's business. From that stage, slowly she realises the importance of having her own identity and reminds her girl children about going for higher education and getting a job. Savitri suffers the insults, but she is unable to tolerate Ramani's infidelity and reacts when he

tries to touch her. She resists him and cries out that even if she burns her skin, she will not be able to cleanse the impurity of his touch. Savitri realizes her dignity as a human being and becomes conscious of the fact that the relationship between husband and wife is no more possible.

Savitri, before leaving the house, says, "I do not possess anything in the world. What possession can a woman call her own except her body?" (88). Adichie, in her famous essay *We Should All Be Feminists* opines that men and women are undeniably different in biological ways, but society exaggerates the difference and imposes certain roles, such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children, on women and those jobs that demand traveling and physical strength to men. Savitri also questions these norms and tries to live on her own. She even goes to the extent of saying that both a prostitute and a wife get their food and shelter by pleasing men; the prostitute changes her man, but a married woman does not. Narayan presents Savitri as affected by traditions, conventions, and other social beliefs. When she asks what the children will do without their mother, he replies, "They will go splendidly without you. No one is indispensable in this world" (88). Once Savitri leaves home, Ramani stays unaffected, and the children do not express the courage to ask why their mother is not coming back.

Savitri is not a strong character; still, she attempts to protest against the tyrannical behavior of patriarchy. When she leaves home, she does not accept charity from anyone and suffers hunger till she earns food. At specific points, she succumbs to external pressures and realizes that she cannot survive independently. The temple priest exploits her. She leaves the job and, without any other go, seeks Mari's help to return home. After returning, again while sitting in the darkroom, she thinks, what else can she do? What possession does she have? Savitri is desperate to make a protest but determined to keep her individuality.

Equality before the law is not necessarily equality in life. Acknowledging this concept, Narayan offers insight into traditional Indian middle-class society. In a socio-cultural context, it is not easy to pursue a life outside the family. However, the unfortunate element is that even after seventy-five years of independence, the role of women in marriage has mostly stayed the same. Society needs to go miles to recognize the value of women. In *The Dark Room*, Savitri is on the way to create her identity. Her return home can be criticized as a failure, but Ramani's change in attitude can be interpreted as a success to Savitri's efforts. He says he should have bought jasmine for her while having lunch and offers more ghee to her. These gestures and considerations may pave the way to a new light in their marital life. Narayan has portrayed the novel in quite a realistic way as a detached observer and grabs the readers' attention to the feelings and emotions of both husband and wife. Simone de Beauvoir rightly pointed out that a woman is the soul of the house, of the family, and the soul of a larger city, nation, and state. Society needs to recognize the value of women, and literary works like *The Dark Room* trace the journey of evolution of a woman to emancipation.

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